Jesus: The Teacher Who Failed

BY GEORGE R. KNIGHT

Picture
Removed
Not only did the disciples fail to understand Jesus’ repeated predictions of His death and resurrection, but up to the time of His crucifixion, not even one of them appears to have been converted.
With a flick of my finger, I could have obliterated such a wayward class with a local nuclear demonstration—but that would have been too quick for my liking.

diate success, Jesus would have folded up His lecture notes and turned in His credentials.

I Don’t Want to Be Like Jesus

Christians hear repeatedly that they ought to be like Jesus. But I don’t want to be like Jesus in some ways. I don’t want to be a teacher who fails. I don’t do well with discouraging days or unruly, thick-headed students. I get depressed and begin to wonder if the world (or at least the teaching profession) wouldn’t be better off without me.

To put it mildly, I like success. In fact, I thrive on it. And I don’t mean success in the by-and-by. I mean success today where I can see it, smell it, savor it, grasp it, touch it, and, best of all, report it to the conference office or the local school constituency. “Look at me,” I want to shout as I exhibit my accomplishments.

I don’t want to be like Jesus. I don’t want to be like the teacher who failed. I want to be greater than Jesus. I want everything I touch to be a shining success. The only problem with that desire is that it hasn’t come true. I have to face the same problems and the same kinds of people that Jesus faced, and the sad truth is that often I have had the same kind of results. I am not greater than Jesus. I also fail.

Success Beyond Failure

Yet, I have discovered, apparent failure and ultimate failure are not the same thing. I still remember my first evangelistic series. It took place in Corsicana, Texas, a town of 26,000 people with an Adventist church of 12 members. And of those 12, nearly all were in their 70s and only one was a male. I was 26 at the time. Now, I have nothing against females. After all, my mother is one. And I have nothing against old people. In fact, I am becoming one. But I desperately desired to have young Adventists of both sexes in my meetings to serve as contact points for my hoped-for converts.

To my joy, there was a young Adventist student at the local community college. I visited his dormitory room, prayed with him, and pled with him to attend my meetings. He never did. I failed.

In fact, by that time I had managed to fail at quite a few things. The result: In the spring of 1969, I turned in my ministerial credentials. Unlike Jesus, I quit. I even decided to give up Adventism and Christianity.

A couple of years later, I was driving across north-central Texas and detoured off the interstate to buy something for my wife at the grocery store in Keene, the location of an Adventist college. While going through the front door, I was stopped by a young man.

“Dare you George Knight?” he queried.

I admitted to that fact.

“Do you remember me?” he shot back. Now at that point I usually try to fake it, but I was so discouraged that I just told him the truth.

“You visited me in my dorm room in Corsicana. That visit was the turning point in my life. I am now studying to be a Seventh-day Adventist minister.”

I didn’t tell him what I was doing.

You see, I had been successful and didn’t know it. I had planted seeds that had germinated underground where I couldn’t see them.

My problem was (and still is) that I not only want to plant, but also to water and harvest those seeds—all in one school term. I can’t tolerate failure or even delay that appears to be failure. I want immediate success. I don’t want to be like Jesus. I want to be greater than Jesus.

What I had to learn is that even though one may plant, it is others who water, and still others who harvest. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit is quietly working in hearts at each stage of their development.

It was the same way in Christ’s teach-
reach and knowledge! Parents and teachers lie down in their last sleep, their life-work seeming to have been wrought in vain; they know not that their faithfulness has unsealed springs of blessing that can never cease to flow; only by faith they see the children they have trained become a benediction and an inspiration to their fellow men, and the influence repeat itself a thousandfold. Many a worker sends out into the world messages of strength and hope and courage, words that carry blessing to hearts in every land; but of the results he, toiling in loneliness and obscurity, knows little. So gifts are bestowed, burdens are borne, labor is done. Men sow the seed from which, above their graves, others reap blessed harvests. They plant trees, that others may eat the fruit. They are content here to know that they have set in motion agencies for good. In the hereafter the action and reaction of all these will be seen” (Education, pp. 305, 306).

What a promise! What a reality!

We need to remember that Jesus was not only an apparent failure as a teacher, He was also the world’s greatest success. He was able to persevere in the face of discouragement because He saw beyond outward appearances.

A Day With Jesus

We need to do the same thing, remembering that we see the Gospel record through the eyes of the Holy Spirit. As a result, given the purposes of the Gospels, it often seems to us that the three years Jesus spent with the disciples were packed with miracles and great teachings.

But I suspect that it looked quite different from inside the disciples’ sandals. To them, a day with Jesus was merely another day of heat, dust, and sweat. They must have wondered: “Why does Jesus always have to walk so far? Doesn’t He know we are hungry? And to top it all off, we have to walk with that loud and boisterous Peter, and James and John who had the gall to bring their mother [Jesus’ aunt] to try to get them the right- and left-hand places in the kingdom. Who wants to spend every day with pushy Judas and the rest of these grippers and whiners?”

From the inside, their days may not have looked all that different from ours.

Similarly, we—like Jesus—need to look beyond the daily discouragements and problems we find in the school, the church, and in our lives to the God who is working behind the scenes in spite of human failings and weaknesses.

Our Responsibility

Our responsibility is not to worry about ultimate victory, but to do our part today. I remember more than 20 years ago when I was just beginning as a young professor at Andrews University. As a rosy-eyed young educational philosopher with revolutionary views, it had been my hope to get the whole place reformed and straightened out in short order. But the reformation wasn’t progressing as rapidly as I had hoped. In fact, not much had changed since my arrival. I was ready to resign and do “something useful.”

But by that time, I had learned a few things from the “failures” of Jesus. I finally went to God on my knees and committed myself to staying “in the work” if He would just let me touch one soul a year with His gospel of truth and love.

He has kept His end of the bargain. In fact, some years I have been able to touch more than one through God’s grace. Over the years, the greatest inspiration in my teaching ministry has been the example of Jesus, the Teacher who failed but also succeeded.

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